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NEW YORK

Contract dispute with infrastructure company's union workers headed for City Council hearing

By GINGER ADAMS OTIS

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS | DEC 02, 2017







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Earning \$25 an hour, Matt Hennessy, 63, is one of the highest-paid utility locators in New York, he said.(David Wexler/For New York Daily News)

All the players in a major contract battle between a New York union and an infrastructure company owned by a private-equity firm are being asked to appear before the City Council this month.

The United States Infrastructure Corporation — better known as USIC — has been invited to testify Dec. 12 to the Council's Committee on Civil Service and Labor, along with Communication Workers of America Local 1101 and Con Edison and the National Grid.



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CWA Local 1101, which ran a successful organizing drive of USIC's 180 New York employees last year, is looking for progress on stalled contract talks.

USIC, which employs another 7,300 workers nationwide, to date has not entertained union demands for higher wages, more paid time off and other benefits in New York.

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According to a letter sent to USIC CEO Rob Tullman from 33 City Councilmembers, two important things are at stake: public safety, and the quality of life of USIC workers.

"These (workers) identify underground gas, electric and telecommunications lines in advance of construction in order to prevent dangerous explosions and the interruption of critical services," the City Council letter said.

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"We have a responsibility to put an end to abusive employment practices, to keep both the workers and the general public safe, and to ensure that city contractors are using city funds to create good-paying jobs that can support a family," the letter said.

The invitation to testify Dec. 12 was also sent to ConEd and the National Grid — the utilities who rely on USIC employees to mark dangerous gas and electrical lines underground.

"With insufficient wages, little paid time off, and erratic, unpredictable schedules while on-call, it is clear these technicians are working under conditions that put themselves and their fellow New Yorkers at risk," the Council's letter said.

If no progress is made with CWA's contract talks, the Council said it was willing to introduce legislation that would force USIC's hand — at least locally.

The council threatened to do the following:



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New York Daily News)

1 Ban the practice of on-call scheduling, which currently forces workers to be on stand-by on weekends and days off — but for no extra compensation.

I Add underground location and utility damage prevention workers to the city's prevailing wage law, which could bring USIC's average hourly pay of \$15 into line with that earned by other utility workers, in some cases closer to \$40.

l Force subcontractors ConEd and National Grid to police all subcontractors to make sure they follow proper worker safety procedures.

USIC didn't return phone calls or an email requesting comment.

The National Grid said its highest priority is public and worker safety.

"We hold our contractors fully accountable and closely monitor their work on and around our gas system. National Grid prides ourself in the workmanship of and strong relations with our internal unions. We have no involvement in any contract negotiations between USIC and unions that represents its workforce," the statement said.

A ConEd spokesman said the company did receive a request to attend the Dec. 12 hearing but hadn't decided on attending yet.

"Con Edison is not a party in the negotiations," the spokesman said.

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USIC, which posted \$1.4 billion in revenue last year, was purchased in 2010 for \$740 million by Leonard Green, a Los Angeles-based private equity firm.

Leonard Green is now in the process of selling USIC to a Swiss private equity firm known as Parnters Group for a reported \$2 billion.

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Matt Hennessy, an underground utility locator for 17 years who turns 64 Sunday, said he used to work 60 hours a week and bring in \$150,000. Now he's lucky to break \$90,000 a year working 70 hours a week.

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"Only four or five other senior guys out there make the same," he said. "The young guys coming on now are lucky to make \$15."

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In fact, until CWA Local 1101 began its organizing drive, USIC paid its hires \$12 an hour. Workers get 80 hours of paid time off a year — that includes the five sick says mandated by state law. Those 80 hours must cover illnesses and vacations, Hennessy said.

Workers are also mandated to be on-call on days off without extra compensation, and when an emergency call comes in they must respond within two hours, Hennessy said.

"We're at-will employees, almost like contracted workers, so we can be fired anytime," he said.

Hennessy said the company often looks for force savings at the expense of worker comfort — like it did this summer, when the mobile utility locators were told not to idle their company cars to run air conditioning while on jobs.

"They said us an email that said we are not allowed to idle more than one hour a day, whether its to run heat in the winter or A/C in the summer," Hennessy said. "My answer to that is, 'Turn off the AC and the heat in all your offices then, if you really want to save money.'"

Ginger Adams Otis

New York Daily News





Ginger Adams Otis joined the NY Daily News in 2012 and worked on the rewrite desk as well as special investigations and assignments before moving on to head the paper's "On the Job" beat, as both a columnist and reporter.

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